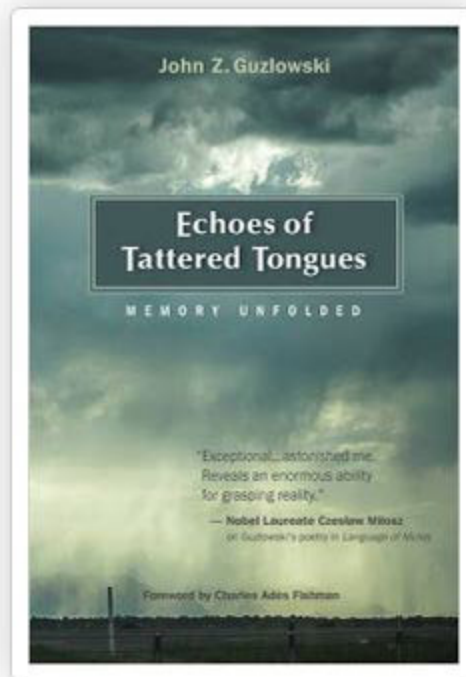


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Monday, February 15, 2016

Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded by John Guzlowski. Book Review



I recently attended the wedding of my sister's daughter. My sister had died two months before. The wedding was a sad event for me for another reason: the huge gap between the bride, on the one hand, and me and her mother, on the other. This gap is so huge that the bride was unaware of it. Not a single word of Polish, our father's language, or Slovak, our mother's language, was spoken at the event. There was no stuffed cabbage. No kolach. There was no cimbalom, no fujara, none of the propulsive, irresistible rhythms that arouse gray-haired church ladies and stoic men with gnarled hands to rise and not stop their furious dance till some time the next day. There weren't even any interesting arguments or fistfights. Everyone there was tall and slim and well-fed and comfortable and unhyphenated American.

There are millions of Americans who are monolingual English speakers with WASP last names and no understanding of need. Their grandparents were Polish and other Eastern European immigrants. They are one generation away from languages with impossible grammars. Languages that can take a noun, any noun, and make it a diminutive, a dearer, more intimate version of itself. That combination of impenetrable toughness and passionate tenderness is found just in the languages these young Americans no longer speak or understand, never mind

the history. But mind the history: The grandparents and great-grandparents of American millennials were once the targets of genocidal monsters who molded world history like Play-Doh. And these ancestors survived.

Their survival is as worthy as Michelangelo's *Pieta* or Newton's physics. It is as worthy as any civilizational monument of recording in detail and archiving for eternity. If we don't remember how Bohunks—Eastern European peasants—survived Stalin and Hitler, steerage, coal mines and steel mills, we lose something precious and unique.

You should buy and read *Echoes of Tattered Tongues: Memory Unfolded* by Polish-American poet John Guzlowski because it will plunge you into a completely different world, unless, of course, you share biographical details with the author. If you are Polish or any other flavor of Bohunk you should buy and read this book because it is your history.

John Guzlowski was born in a displaced persons Camp in Germany after World War II. His Polish Catholic father had been in the Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald for four years. His mother was a slave laborer. John Guzlowski's Polish Catholic grandmother, aunt, and cousin were murdered by Nazis and Ukrainians. They raped his Aunt Zofia and broke her teeth; they stomped his cousin to death. With his bayonet, a Nazi sexually mutilated John's Aunt Genja. In 1951, Guzlowski, his parents and his sister left Germany and moved to Chicago.

Echoes of Tattered Tongues contains about one hundred short poems and essays. They address Guzlowski's experience as the son of two Polish survivors of Nazism. Guzlowski's artistry perfectly captures the attitudes, the worldview, and the details of daily life of his parents' generation. Guzlowski describes his own mission. "I am writing for all the people ... whose stories were never told, whose voices got lost somewhere in the great cemetery of the 20th century—I feel that I have an obligation ... to give them a place to be heard ... all those forgotten, voiceless refugees, DPs, and survivors that the last century produced."

Guzlowski's book details and archives how these people survived.

They keep going—through the terror
in the snow and the misery
in the rain—till some guy pierces
their stomachs with a bayonet

or some sickness grips them, and still
they keep going, even when there
aren't any rungs on the ladder,
even when there aren't any ladders.

I grew up in America, but I knew what it was to live in two nations at once. In one nation, much effort had to be exerted to remain warm and fed. Rooms were overstuffed with knickknacks, multiplicities of curtains, oil paintings of distant villages, church calendars, mismatched and heavy furniture. There was always ham and potatoes, onions and beets, mushrooms and sauerkraut. You ate till you felt sick.

History was like an invisible, multidimensional lyre; you made one move that plucked it and suddenly everyone was remembering the czars, or that time uncle stole the chickens, or last year I bought you flowers and you never said thank you. Good God but you fought. And laughed. And sang, spontaneously, out of thin air, you sang, in several languages; no one

questioned your spontaneous singing, but they might join in. You put your foot across the threshold, and suddenly you were in America, and none of that made any sense at all. I re-enter that redolent world while reading *Echoes of Tattered Tongues*. Yes, this is how these people saw, thought, loved and fought.

The poems don't rhyme. Guzlowski's sentences are short. He writes in basic vocabulary and makes use mostly of one- and two-syllable Anglo-Saxon words. I was startled when I encountered a multi-syllable Latin-root word, "preparations," in his poem "My Mother's Sister after the War." One need not feel intimidated by these poems. If you can read the side of a box of cereal, you can understand them.

Guzlowski talks about objects and behaviors that would be completely familiar to his parents. He recounts history as it is told by survivor elders and remembered by their offspring. That is, his history is intimate and disjointed. I don't think Hitler is mentioned in his entire book. In a dream, Guzlowski's deceased father returns and teaches us.

"this is what war is.

One man has a chicken, and another doesn't.
One man is hungry, and another isn't.
One man is alive, and another is dead."

I say, there must be more, and he says,
"No, that's all there is. Everything else
Is the fancy clothes they put on the corpse."

Typically, writers unleash purple prose and outlandish metaphors to communicate madness. Guzlowski describes madness in the most Spartan of terms.

She had been mad before
in the camps, felt objects change
their position, their shape,

the stove from there
move here, the floor
become a thing of dreams.

Guzlowski's figures of speech do not range beyond what would be understood by someone who had lived his entire life in a small Polish village, or a working class neighborhood in Chicago. There is no mention of, say, ocean waves, or Cesar, or the Great Wall of China.

Guzlowski comments on his own minimal style in his poem "Kitchen Polish." Guzlowski spoke Polish as a child but when he arrived in America his language became English. His Polish language skills are stunted.

I can't tell you about Kant
in Polish, or the Reformation,
or deconstruction

or why the Germans moved east
before attacking west,

or where I came from,

but I can count to ten, say hello
and goodbye, ask for coffee, bread or soup.

Writers give themselves permission to fill in the blanks, to use metaphors to create a coherent picture in their readers' minds, even when the writers themselves lack basic information. Writers strive for symmetry. Guzlowski does none of this. Thus, the image of World War II and post-war life in America in *Echoes* is a chaotic one. Guzlowski reports that after they'd arrived in America, the family was so poor and so cold that they burned scavenged wooden boxes in their stove. But that's as far as his memory goes. Guzlowski does not attempt to fill in the blank.

I don't remember what we did the next night.
Maybe we burned our crayons and chairs.

Guzlowski tells the tale of a "friend in America" who murdered her husband, a captain of the Lancers, legendary Polish military heroes, by forcing him to drink cognac till he choked to death. One wonders, did this really happen? Did she face trial? There is no answer; perhaps Guzlowski does not know. We all have stories like that in our memory. Was my Uncle Rudy's godfather Archduke Ferdinand, as he claims, in one of my memories? Was he really my uncle? I'll never know; everyone who knew him whom I knew is now gone.

Guzlowski's book is essential for anyone wanting fully to understand ethnicity in America. We are the eponym of the Polak joke. Guzlowski writes that we are understood to be "dirty, dumb, lazy, dishonest, immoral, licentious, drunken." Social elites—college professors, journalists, clergy—don't tell Polak jokes. But they do perpetuate a stereotype of Poles as the world's worst racist bigots and haters. In this revision of history, Polish Catholic peasants, not Nazis, are responsible for the Holocaust. In the most recent version, Poles are racist because they resist the mass migration Angela Merkel has invited into Europe.

Polish-American writers face a challenge every bit as daunting as that faced by African American writers. Is an African American character a "Magical Negro," that is, a character who is so benign he is unbelievable and stripped of unique humanity? Or is he someone with normal, human flaws? If so, do these flaws merely support the negative stereotype others have created of us?

Guzlowski's Polish-Americans are not airbrushed, denatured, plaster saints, invented only so that Poles will have someone to feel proud of. His parents "couldn't spend a night without arguing with each other in Polish, the language of misery, poverty, and alienation." These Poles drink. There is domestic violence. They break the law. Guzlowski places this behavior in the context of survival against all odds. The reader knows that if he had gone through what these characters have gone through, he would probably drink and beat his kids, too. These drunken fighters are not stereotypes. They are fully human and therefore lovable.

Through authentic and meticulously observed and recorded details, Guzlowski reaches the universal. All readers, of any ethnicity or life experience, will find something to identify with in these pages. In the poem "My Parents Retire to Arizona," Guzlowski describes the process of cleaning out his parents' home in Chicago. His parents beg him, "Please, take these things."

We know what they cannot say:
"Think of us as you use these things.

Once we were as young as you, cleaning
the house, dreaming over a backyard..."

Too, Guzlowski dialogues with the majority of his readers who are not concentration camp survivors. In "A Sonnet about Dying," Guzlowski's mother observes, "Half of us are going to the grave, and the other half to a wedding."

There is debate about Polish non-Jews speaking of their suffering under the Nazis. Bozenna Urbanowicz-Gilbride had been interned in two Nazi slave labor camps. Her mother was in two concentration camps. In 2003, she was criticized for referring to herself as a "Polish Catholic Holocaust survivor." The Polish-American priest John T. Pawlikowski said, "The USHMM recognizes only the six million Jews as victims of the Holocaust."

It is true that the Nazis focused their destruction on Jews in a way that they did not focus on other ethnicities. It is also true that Polish non-Jews suffered torture, death, cultural genocide and dispossession to an extent experienced by no other groups except Jews and Roma. **It is important that authors like Guzlowski tell their story, and that those stories be heard, in full.**

I read *Echoes* in two sittings. It was a concentrated dose. Given the power, and the subject matter, of the poems, I suspect that many readers will read them in smaller doses—one or two poems at a time. When I read the poems back-to-back, I did appreciate them, but I also felt that there was something missing. That something was transcendence. As the author of a book about Polish-Jewish relations, I have read many World War II memoirs. In them, no matter how bleak things got, I always encountered, however small, an element of transcendence. Authors would say, paraphrase, "Yes, the Nazis took everything I had and reduced me to my lowest point, but I am more than this." For some it was hope, art, or service. The most powerful voice of transcendence is Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Guzlowski's parents survived. They found each other, married, and remained together, in spite of their wounds. They produced tall, handsome John and his sister Danusha. Guzlowski became a successful scholar and author. He has touched the lives of students who adore him. He is happily married to a beautiful woman, a proud and loving father and grandfather. In fact in Guzlowski's poems I see evidence of transcendence: his parents hug him. They tell him their stories. He records these stories.

And yet Guzlowski rarely waivers from his insistence that life consists, as in that famous quote from Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*, of "no arts, no letters, no society ... continual fear and danger of violent death ... The life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." There is one moment of light; his sister tells him that in school there is a boy named Adas who has no father. The boy is hungry and lacks supplies. The other children feed him and give him pencils. "God loves these children," Guzlowski reports.

When I began to live a very privileged life – that of a graduate student at UC Berkeley, one of the best universities in the US – I missed the intellectual and aesthetic life I lived in my childhood home, among my own family. My parents thought, created, and sang. They were more than their circumstances. I felt freer to question and create in my working class Bohunk household in a small New Jersey town than I felt on the UC Berkeley campus.

While reading *Echoes*, I asked myself, what is the difference between its cramped worldview and my own household, and the World War II memoirs I've read that contain passages every bit as grim as those in *Echoes* but also passages that insist on transcendence?

My best guess after pondering this question for the past day is this: my mother was a devout Catholic. The other authors I've read often strongly identified as Jewish, even if only as secular Jews. Belief in divine love, sacrifice, and meaning changed their interpretation of their life stories, and their lives. One example: Wladyslaw Bartoszewski was an Auschwitz prisoner. After release, he went to a priest and sought advice on what to do with his life. The priest told him to serve others. He went on to aid Jews.

Echoes mentions God, Jesus, or Catholicism on almost every other page. These mentions are almost always not just negative, but condemnatory. Polack Joe insists on the folly of faith. "We prayed our guts out. For what? For ashes." Polack Joe says he would crucify his own son before he'd pray for forgiveness for his abusive father. Jesus, Guzlowski reports, lives in "the world of clouds far beyond." Jesus radiates red rays but provides "no warmth or true comfort." This God who lives in the clouds is naïve about human suffering. A severed horse's head "will teach even God a lesson." God is so uninterested "He no longer looks for Buchenwald on the maps." Polish villagers are executed by Nazis. "God doesn't love these people."

God is reflected in human evil. Murdering Nazis enjoy their work. "We love to kill. It is the hidden God in each of us." "War is the god who breeds and kills." The Bible is one of the "books that lie." The Chicago priests who heard young Guzlowski's confession were later found to be pedophiles. "They weren't interested in me. I wasn't pretty enough for them."

I see a very different Jesus, and very different priests, in Polish art and life. The most frequent depiction of Jesus I see in Polish art is Chrystus Frasobliwy. This is not a cloud-dwelling, ray-radiating maker of false promises who observes Poles' suffering from an uninterested distance. This Christ wears, heavily, a crown of thorns. His back is whipped. He is about to be crucified. He suffers *with* Poles.

Henryk Gorecki uses this Polish tradition of God suffering with humanity in the lyrics to his worldwide success, "Symphony of Sorrowful Songs." The first movement quotes a lamentation from the Holy Cross monastery. The second movement is the prayer to Mary inscribed by Helena Blazusiakówna, a teenage Polish girl, on the walls of her Gestapo prison. Polish priests like Maximilian Kolbe, Karol Wojtyła, and Jerzy Popieluszko inspired Polish people in ways that changed world history.

I respect Guzlowski's understanding of Jesus' and Catholicism's place in his life. I am familiar with anger at God and a sense of God's non-existence or absence. I am commenting on one aspect of *Echoes*, and my best guess at one possible understanding of it. **Overall this is an excellent, important, highly recommended book.**

Posted by [Danusha Goska](#) at [9:20 AM](#)